

FILIZ SULEJMAN

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Sufi Motives in Elif Shafak's Writing Perceived as a Bridge between East and West

The Phenomenon of Elif Shafak

Ernst Cassirer in his *Essay on Man* described man as an *animal symbolicum*. Human activity is the creation of symbols, a building up of their own universe. Man is perceived as a creator of culture, which according to Cassirer, is a world of *symbolic forms*.

Culture includes inter alia religion, myths, language and literature. The latter is especially important in terms of this article. Elif Shafak's writing may be perceived as one of the symbols of contemporary culture. This well-known Turkish writer, woman, mother, TED speaker, political commentator and feminist (it would be unfair not to mention these occupations) perfectly combines symbols of Eastern and Western culture. Her novels are sourced from both European realism and Turkish magic.

Shafak's biography itself is symbolic. Referring to an idea of Deleuze, she represents the modern nomad. Shafak was born in Strasburg and spent her teenage years outside Turkey. Now her life is divided between Istanbul and London. The nomad maintains a state of constant movement. It is true in terms of Shafak. She is perpetually on the move and does not belong to one culture or one world. Saying that she is only a Turkish writer would be untrue. Shafak cannot be "reterritorialized"; as a nomad she does not own her own land. The same can be said in regard to her prose. It should not be perceived from one strict, culturally defined point of view, as it is multifaceted. To fully understand her writing, a holistic approach is needed. The

constant movement and travelling is what, perhaps, allowed her to look at Turkish beliefs and tradition from a distance. She reaches out to the mystical tradition, presenting Islam in other ways than it is used to. Her greatest advantage is first-hand knowledge of the Turkish and Western realities. This way she can present Sufism and other concepts in a way that is understandable to inhabitants of the Western World. Her greatest advantage is simple and straightforward language used to present the core ideas standing behind the whole concept of Sufism, which in its pure form may be confusing for the Western world.

Along with Orhan Pamuk, Shafak is a great representative of modern Turkey, although her writing is less nostalgic than Pamuk's. What is unique about Shafak is that her novels concern not only "safe" subjects, but also important and difficult topics such as honour killings, the role of a woman in Muslim culture, homosexuality, sexual abuse, mysticism or even the Jewish contribution to the development of Turkish culture. In the *Bastard of Istanbul* Shafak attempted to heal the trauma of the Turkish – Armenian issues. The Genocide of Armenians performed in 1915 by the Ottoman Empire is the second best documented genocide in world history (after the Holocaust). The Republic of Turkey officially did not recognize this tragic event and continues to defy that characterization. It is the primary reason for division between Turks and Armenians. Shafak, although originally Turkish, tries to do justice to both nations. The book brought her fame and popularity and was as well a cause of problems in her private life. After calling the Armenian massacre of 1915 "genocide", she was accused of insulting "Turkishness".¹ In the end, she avoided the punishment as the lawsuit was dismissed, but it is worth noting that Shafak's aim was not provocation but to draw reader's attention on important topics and awaken their consciousness.

Shafak's prose combines two worlds: the traditional and the ultra-modern. Two totally opposite concepts function equally in her books, which are deep studies of beliefs, rituals and folk knowledge. She offers a synthesis of different styles and conventions by combining Eastern techniques of storytelling with a Western literary style. Genies and ghosts live next to ordinary people, as in ancient times. The characters represent dual worlds. Their behaviour is permeated with the seemingly opposite values of the Eastern and Western worlds.

I believe in the power of literature to help us transcend the boundaries of the Self and to build bridges across cultures, religions and nations.²

Even Shafak's penname has a magic meaning. "Elif" (Arabic *alif*) is the first letter of the Arabic alphabet. According to Muslim symbolism each of 28 letters has its own

¹ Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code now provides penalties for criticizing the "Turkish nation", not "Turkishness". It has been criticised by many organisations and authority figures since it was established in 2005. According to the European Court of Human Rights this article constitutes a threat to the right of freedom of expression in Turkey.

² "10 questions with Elif Shafak", *Good Reads*, [on line] <http://elifshafak.com/images/reviews/goodreads/index.php>, March 3, 2015.

hidden meaning and every sura of the Qur'an starts with one of them. Moreover, in Turkish "şafak" means "dawn".

Shafak writes both in English and Turkish. She admits that each of them is suitable for expressing different emotions and feelings.

There are things I find easier to say in Turkish; other things are easier to express in English. If I am writing about melancholy and longing and heartache, I think it is easier in Turkish. If there is strong humour, satire and irony, then it is easier in English.³

The concept of novels in Turkish literature is relatively new. In this culture poetry had traditionally higher status, especially during Ottoman rule. During that time classical poetry was influenced by Persian literature, which is why the former lexis is still associated in secular Turkey with conservatism and backwardness. Surprisingly the new generation of writers began to reach for the old flowery language. In Shafak's case it is particularly understandable as most of her novels are inspired by the culture of the past. Many "osmanisms"⁴ can be found in her novels. These borrowings were used by the middle and upper class of Turkish society from the 13th century until the Atatürk's reform of language in the beginning of 20th century. Then the Arabic alphabet was replaced with the Latin one, which was adjusted to the Turkish language. All Arabic and Persian borrowings were removed, and new Turkish words were invented instead. Hundreds of words were abolished in the name of "linguistic purification". The changes were radical, causing huge differences between modern Turkish and Ottoman Turkish. The main aim of these changes was to encourage the growth of a new variety of written Turkish that would more accurately reflect the spoken vernacular. Moreover, the new language was important for building Turkey's new national identity as a post-Ottoman state.

Shafak's writing may be distinguished from others because of her attention to form and aesthetic expression. She offers the reader a journey into a spiritual world of words. Her narrative recalls the narrator of the novel *The Hakawati*. Its author, Rabi Alameddine, who is a Lebanese writer, goes back to the traditional story of the Middle East. He tries to prove that the boundaries between the real world and fairy tales never really existed. And so does Shafak. It is believed that writers incarcerated in Eastern and Western traditions have to offer the reader a synthesis of mystical motifs, legends and beliefs of different cultures. This type of writing provides a kind of fresh air for Europeans, who have always been both fascinated and intimidated by the Orient.

Shafak has been called the "Turkish Sheherezada" many times because of the magical and mysterious atmosphere, a multitude of suggestive images, and the exoticism that permeates her novels, making them look like one of the fairy tales of

³ "There is a lack of democratic culture in Turkey", *Quantara*, April 25, 2014, [on line] <http://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-elif-shafak-there-is-a-lack-of-democratic-culture-in-turkey>, May 25, 2014.

⁴ Borrowings from Persian and Arabic.

a thousand and one nights. Her writing is filled with many flavours, scents and whispers making it a magical and multicultural creation.

What is more, Shafak writes about Sufism – topic which was usually considered as a men's field. For her debut, *Sufi*, she received the Award of Rumi, a distinction awarded in the circle of mystical literature. Not only *Sufi* but also *Mirrors of the City* and *The Forty Rules of Love* oscillate around this Muslim mysticism. Thus, Sufism may be the key to understand her writing.

How can one describe Sufism?

Sufism is not easily defined. It is often seen as a branch of Islam, usually described as its mystical variant. It may also be considered as a philosophy of existence.

We often hear that Sufism is 'mysticism' or 'esoterism' or 'spirituality', usually with the adjective 'Islamic' tacked on the front. Such labels can provide an orientation, but they are both far too broad and far too narrow to designate the diverse teachings and phenomena that have been identified with Sufism over history.⁵

The concept may be defined in many ways according to different Sufi masters and thinkers. Some even believe that it has a resemblance to Yoga, Zen or Kabbalah, but despite similarities it is not the same concept.

Sufism is a path followed by an individual who, having been able to free himself or herself from human vices and weaknesses in order to acquire angelic qualities and conduct pleasing to God, lives in accordance with the requirements of God's knowledge and love, and in the resulting spiritual delight that ensues.⁶

Sufism teaches that the road to the love of God leads only through love for man. It is a long – lasting spiritual development of an individual.

Sufism is a religion of heart, the religion in which one thing is most important, and that is to seek God in the heart of mankind.⁷

This concept is entirely different from the image of Islam in the eyes of contemporary Europe perceived as fundamentalism. Contrary to public opinion, Islam does not stand in contradiction to peace and harmony – Sufism, seen as its branch, provides evidence of that.

[Sufism] does not contradict any of the Islamic ways based on the Qur'an and the Sunna.⁸

⁵ W.C. Chittick, *Sufism. A Short Introduction*, Oxford 2000, p. 12.

⁶ M. Fetullah Gülen, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism. Emerald Hills of the Heart*, New Jersey 2006, p. XII.

⁷ "Sufi Order International" [on line] <http://www.centrum-universel.com/sufie.htm>, May 13, 2014.

⁸ M. Fetullah Gülen, op. cit., p. XIX.

What is worth noting, is that, according to H.A.R. Gibb, in the past some Muslims used to consider Sufism as “survival of superstitions”, “cultural backwardness” or even “deviation”.⁹ It may have something to do with the origins of the notion *sufi* which originally meant “the one who wears wool”¹⁰, hence a person who is ascetic, alienated from other Muslims, simply an outsider, someone who does not behave as the rest of the group. Woolen garments were considered as a traditional piece of clothing worn by prophets in the Middle East. Others derive *sufi* from *safa* – purity or *sawfa* – the chosen ones.¹¹

Sufism is more individualistic form of belief. Sufis do not base their faith upon strict, traditional religious laws or orders. They are convinced that unity with God can be achieved by the enlightened individual in himself. One of the main beliefs is that God is the source of everything, but it does not mean that one can be passive. Being a Sufi is all about taking active participation in spiritual growth.

Among Sufis, it is generally agreed that Sufism is a mystical journey towards Truth, through a process of unveiling and illumination.¹²

The human desire to transcend oneself is based on the belief that originally mankind comes from the one – the Absolute. At the end of the journey, the individual realizes his identity with God. As of the times of Rumi, the concept of Love played an important role in Sufi teaching. It is perceived as a powerful force which transforms believers.

The moment you start looking for Love, you start to change within and without.¹³

Spiritual Poem (Masnawi-and Ma'nawi) – the bible of Sufism written by Rumi – inspired Shafak to create *The Forty Rules of Love*. Quotes and poems taken directly from *Masnawi* may be found in the novel. Every chapter starts with one rule of love. These principles are woven into the plot of the novel as a commentary on the situation of emerging characters.

Shafak's interpretation of the concept of Sufism presents it as a kind of Universal Spirituality, which is devoid of religious restrictions. This way a Sufi may be anyone whose heart is pure and loving. According to Shafak it is a universal way of life no matter what one's background is.

⁹ “The Structure of Religious Thought in Islam” (1948), reprinted in H.A.R. Gibb, *Studies on Civilization of Islam*, Boston, 1962, p. 218.

¹⁰ W.C. Chittick, op. cit., p. 13.

¹¹ C.W. Ernst, “Tasawwuf (Sufism)”, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, R. Martin [ed.], USA 2003.

¹² F. Zangenehpour, *Sufism and the Quest for Spiritual Fulfillment*, Gothenburg Studies in English, no. 80, 2000, p. 47.

¹³ E. Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love*, New York 2010.

In my novels Sufism is not introduced as a theoretical, abstract teaching. It is a living, breathing, moving, peaceful energy. I am interested in what Sufism means for us in the modern world. I wanted to bring out what how Rumi's philosophy appeals to us today, even when we seem to be miles and centuries and cultures away from it.¹⁴

Other scholars perceive this concept differently. Martin Lings insists that Sufism is only an Islamic phenomenon, not a universal one. Although, almost every religion system has its own mystic version, they differ from Sufism. In Lings' opinion Sufism is particular, not versatile.

However, to Shafak Sufism is simply a way of life – it is not a philosophy or ritual. It is universal and all-embracing. She sees it as an inner journey which is based on empathy and also a desire to transcend the limits of the self. Muslims, Christians and Jews debate about the outer form of their worship, while Sufism concentrates on the inner form as it perceives religions in terms of unity with God. What is really important is the essence. As Rumi said:

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or zen. I am not of the East, nor of the West... My place is placeless, a trace of traceless.¹⁵

Another unique feature of Sufism is the concept of individual contact with God, without intermediaries. The individual achieves unity with God without the involvement of others. However, most religious systems of the world assume that the existence of an enlightened guide or leader is inevitable on the way to God.

Nothing should stand between yourself and God. Not imams, priests, rabbis, or any other custodians of moral or religious leadership. Not spiritual masters, not even your faith.¹⁶

The above does not mean that Sufism excludes any mentor leadership. It simply means that the leader, known as Sufi master, passes on the rules of Love. These principles are not his own, he is just a messenger. The genuine leader remains transparent and does not impose his own beliefs.

The idea of Sufism is not easily understood by the western world, which puts rationality over the faith. According to Ziauddin Sardar:

The western notion of science and rationality is deeply rooted in mathematical realism. Only that which can be described by mathematics is real and can be believed.¹⁷

The truth was usually passed on to the Sufi masters in visions and dreams. To make them understandable to commoners they had to use a wide variety of symbols. Many Sufi authors used the symbolism of wine, a drop in the ocean, light, colour

¹⁴ Document [on line] <http://www.elifshafak.com/images/interviews/examiner/index.asp>, May 13, 2014.

¹⁵ Rumi, *Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, different editions.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Z. Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other*, London, 1997, p. 13.

prisms, mirrors, roses or birds for spiritual education. Stories are told to illustrate an issue. This way it was possible to explain difficult concepts to those who were less enlightened. Sufi poetry is full of allegories, subtle poetic comparisons; certain words or images have recognised meanings. For instance, usually love between man and women reflects love between a human's soul and God.

When a true lover of God goes to a tavern, the tavern becomes his chamber of prayer, but when a wine bibber goes into the same chamber it becomes his tavern. In everything we do, it is our hearts that make the difference, not our outer appearances.¹⁸

Mystical reality may be misunderstood and underestimated by rational West. The Eastern way of thinking seems irrational, superstitious or even naive to some. In those terms Shafak's work is extraordinary. Her attempt to "translate" Sufism into understandable language is worth noting.

Rumi

In the past, Anatolia was called Rum as it belonged to Roman Empire for over a thousand years. In the thirteenth century, however, these lands had been almost entirely conquered by the Turkish Seljuk dynasty. Their capital was Konya – an important centre of culture and a place where Rumi (originally Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī) spent his adult life.¹⁹

Rumi, also called Mevlana (lit. *Our Lord*) was the most prominent Sufi poet, Persian mystic and Islamic theologian. He was the founder of the Order of Whirling Dervishes. In 1244 Rumi met Shams, who was known for his unconventional customs. For some he was even a heretic who challenged conventional wisdom and social prejudice wherever he encountered it. This meeting changed their lives. Their friendship influenced both of them. Rumi transformed from an orthodox Muslim into a poet and love bard. He approved of jihad only as a fight against one's own ego, rather than extending that militant impulse outward against enemies of Islam as the only path to God leads through love. The meeting is also the starting point in the Shafak's novel. Rumi's family resented Shams for turning their settled way of life upside down.

For months the two mystics lived closely together, and Rumi neglected his disciples and family so that his scandalized entourage forced Shams to leave the town in February 1246. Jalāl al-Dīn was heartbroken; his eldest son, Sultān Walad, eventually brought Shams back from Syria. The family, however, could not tolerate the close relation of Jalāl al-Dīn with his beloved, and one night in 1247 Shams disappeared forever. In the 20th century it was established that Shams was indeed murdered, not without the

¹⁸ E. Shafak, op. cit.

¹⁹ "Džalaloddin Rumi (Moulana)", [on line] <http://www.literaturaperska.com/rumigazale/orumim.html>, May 17, 2014.

knowledge of Rumi's sons, who hurriedly buried him close to a well that is still extant in Konya. This experience of love, longing, and loss turned Rumi into a poet.²⁰

After Shams disappearance Rumi suffered because of the impossibility of loving deeply enough to achieve union with the beloved God. When Shams vanished, Rumi became a poet. He did not write, however. Poetry was flowing through his mouth. It was written down by his students. These were not his words, the one who was talking was Shams.

In Persian a collection of poems is called *diwan*, but surprisingly there is no Rumi's *diwan*. Collection of poems by Rumi is called *Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*. Instead of mentioning himself he made Shams the true author. Rumi remained just a messenger. The poems, which are masterpieces of wisdom and eloquence, glorify love in its ultimate form, which, as their story shows, can sometimes be attained only through great pain.

The Order of Whirling Dervishes was founded in Konya after the death of Rumi. Since then it became a very influential society. The order had operated for centuries until 1925 when Atatürk banned all the Sufi institutions all over Turkey. The most distinguished feature of the order is their extraordinary dance, which is performed in the circle with their spiritual leader in the middle. The dance is very fast as its main aim is to achieve unity with God through trance. During the whirling, the dervishes declaim ninety nine names of God (e.g. *The Giver of Life, The Source of Peace and Safety, The Exceedingly Merciful*). The one hundredth name is *Allah*. Although the order was banned by Atatürk, it has survived and dervishes may be found in modern Turkey. Nowadays they perform mainly as a tourist attraction. They do not have the right to establish any official Sufi brotherhood, and that is why they are a non-political organization.

Nowadays, Rumi is seen as an icon of global culture, not only Muslim civilisation. In honour of the 800th anniversary of his birth, UNESCO declared 2007 a commemorative year. This choice was justified with the words:

He [Rumi] remains one of the greatest thinkers and scholars of Islamic civilization. The peoples of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey consider him to be their own poet. He addressed humanity as a whole: I do not distinguish between the relative and the stranger.²¹

It is important to note that Rumi's history is not relevant because of the fact that he was the Sufi master; what makes him extraordinary is his unique relationship with Shams from Tabriz and the legacy that remained long after their death. As

²⁰ A. Schimmel, "Rūmī, sufi mystic and poet", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, [on line] <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/299621/Rumi>, May 17, 2014.

²¹ 800th Anniversary of the Birth of Mawlana Jalal-ud-Din Balkhi-Rumi, [on line] http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=34694&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html, June 1, 2014.

I mentioned before from the times of Rumi, Love, understood as a whole concept, became one of the most important truths of Sufism.

The Forty Rules of Love

The plot of *Forty Rules of Love* written by Shafak is set in two different locations and time periods. The author presents seemingly different stories, which are joined together by the character of Rumi, who is a starting point for both of them. The first story happens in the modern world, in the USA and is represented by Ella, an American housewife, and Aziz Zahara, a writer and author of a book about Rumi. The second one presents Rumi himself and shows his relationship with Shams from Tabriz, who becomes his spiritual master. Those two relationships, although set in different time periods, are very much alike. Rumi as well as Ella reject the life they knew, knowing that the change that is about to come may not be easy. Through joining two worlds – the one of the Middle East and the one of the USA, Shafak creates an opportunity for mutual communion for both East and West by showing similarities between those two seemingly different realities.

There are similarities between two centuries, especially in the way civilizations, cultures and religions clash. The age we live in harbours two opposite tendencies. On the one hand there is a growing interest in spirituality (...) On the other hand there is also a deeply rooted xenophobia and fear for each other. There is deeply rooted ignorance with regard to Islam and too many clichés and generalizations everywhere around the world.²²

The Forty Rules of Love seems to be intended to challenge the worldwide prejudice that Islam is only a religion of violence and brutality. Its aim is to tear away the bias and present the other, equally true, image of it. Moreover, the novel is a response to, and an evocation of, the universal need to love as it lacks in modern world.

Each chapter in Shafak's novel *Forty Rules of Love* oscillates around one rule of love inspired by Rumi's philosophy. Shafak builds up the plot of her novel around the correlation between the world of the past (13th century) and the present times (21st century). Surprisingly it goes very well together. Through these rules we get an image of a peaceful, loving philosophy which can be adjusted not only to Islam but could be also connected with any other religion. They are as relevant nowadays as they were hundred years ago. Sufism is based on love, forgiveness, truth and mercy, concepts that appeal to many people around the world.

Thanks to Shafak, Rumi's poetry may be more accessible to the public. Her works are a great study of those elements which are unique in Eastern and Western worlds. She confirms that both realities have a lot to offer, and she is not afraid to

²² "10 questions with Elif Shafak", op. cit.

derive from them. Rumi's poetry is a great source of knowledge and hopefully it will not be forgotten.

The relationship between Shams and Rumi is presented through the eyes of other characters who appear in Shafak's book. Suleiman the Drunk, Hasan the Beggar, Desert Rose the Courtesan, Baybars the Warrior, Rumi's wife Kerra, Kimya his adopted daughter, his sons Sultan Walad and Aladdin. These characters have a symbolic dimension and they provide background for the main characters. The multiple narration gives depth and is an opportunity to present another Rule of Love. Characters such as the concubine or drunk, who are excluded from the society, reach God. Rumi, who at the beginning is just a proper cleric, changes into a passionate Sufi poet. There are countless examples of symbolism in Shafak's novel. The conclusion is that anyone whose heart is pure and teeming with love for humans and God may become Sufi. What Shafak is trying to say in her book is that it does not matter what one's background is. No social limitations can stop the real follower of Sufism. Without knowing the context, the storyline may seem naïve and shallow. The truth is that Shafak herself is incarcerated in the culture of East and West and so are her novels. Characters represent her heritage – Rumi and Shams are linked to her Turkish legacy and Ella and Aziz symbolize her life outside the Turkey. Local, folk, and emotional elements may be found in her novels as well as global, universal and rational elements. However, Shafak's works are not intended to be a manifestation of identity – she avoids being seen only as a representative of her culture. Shafak explicitly defies definition – her writing blends East and West, feminism and tradition, the local and the global, Sufism and rationalism, creating one of today's most unique voices in literature. She is a symbol of contemporary culture, her biography, beliefs, views, writing – all of them are permeated with symbolism. Shafak represents a modern world which is not unitary, but multidimensional. She blends elements of different cultures proving that all of them have a wide variety of values to offer.